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Written statement* submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is hereby circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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SOUTH ASIA: Asia's children on the verge of severe malnourishment

The Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) wishes to draw attention of the Human Rights Council to the massive relapse of severe malnutrition among children in Asia, reversing the advances made over decades.

The relapse is particularly startling in Sri Lanka, a country which has made spectacular achievements in snatching its population away from hunger. The country has not only seen its hunger level stagnating at 25.5 percent in 2017 as it was in 2016; it has also seen a rapid rise in prevalence of wasting among its children. Over the five-year period 2012-2016, the prevalence of wasting in Sri Lankan children under five years has increased to 21.4 percent, as against only 13.3 percent in 2006-2010. The increase is particularly worrying as only four countries in the world have child wasting above 20 percent: India, Djibouti, South Sudan and now Sri Lanka.

Ironically, it seems that the reversal caught the Sri Lankan authorities unaware. As no one saw this coming, no measures were taken to arrest the problem before it got out of hand.

India, always an underperformer and one of the main reasons for the child malnutrition rates being very high, is performing equally worse when it comes to wasting of its children. The National Family Health Survey-4 (2015) shows that high wasting rates are prevalent even in the states that have performed better in reducing child and infant mortality rates in the past decade. It also shows that wasting among children reduced only in 12 Indian states, whereas it increased in 15, including in those doing economically better than many others, such as Maharashtra (9.1%), Karnataka (8.5%), Goa (7.8%), Gujarat (7.7%) and Punjab (6.4%).

In fact, as against other indices of child malnutrition, which have mostly come down in past decades, wasting of children has increased from 17.1 percent in 1998-02 to 21 percent in 2012-16 in India.

Pakistan is performing equally worse, and is in fact the second most undernourished country in Asia. Stunting among children has increased in the country and now stands at 45 percent as against 40.3 percent in 2006.

Similarly, the rank of the Philippines in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) has hardly changed in the last three years. Even worse, it has now slipped further down with a 0.1 percentage point increase, returning to the 'alarming' situation from the 'moderate' category. The current GHI score of the country at 20.0 is higher than 2016's 19.9 and barely lower than 2015's 20.1.

Evidentially, the nutritional status of children in the region is at serious threat across countries. Further, it is so despite gigantic differences among countries in terms of economy, growth and resources. The situation also shows that the economic growth of a country does not necessarily translate into eradication of hunger, particularly for the weaker sections of its citizenry. Sub-national analyses of hunger statistics clearly show how governments around the world have abandoned a section of their population without any visible reduction in their hunger levels.

Sadly, it is not that the governments of these countries do not have resources to eradicate hunger, particularly among children. In fact, the resources required are so small, that even poorer countries can afford them easily as shown by countries like Cambodia, Nepal and Bangladesh. Cambodia's GHI score was a whopping 45.8 in 1992 for instance, but by 2017, Cambodia brought it down to 22.2. Nepal too has similar story; it brought down its hunger index of 42.5 in 1992 to 22.0 in 2017. The numbers for Bangladesh are pegged at 53.6 in 1992, 37.6 in 2000 and 26.5 in 2017. Evidentially, all these countries brought down their hunger levels significantly; in fact, they almost halved them over the decades. They did it against many odds, Cambodia limping back to normalcy after an almost complete collapse during the Pol Pot era, Bangladesh achieving the same despite battling an annual menace of devastating floods, and Nepal doing the same despite its mountainous topography and a catastrophic earthquake.

The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Reports give an idea of how easily affordable eradicating hunger and malnutrition is. It observed in 2015 for instance, that India can provide for "a basic and modest set of social security guarantees for all citizens with universal pension, basic health care, child benefits and employment schemes" for just 4% of its GDP. As against this, the total budgetary allocation on these heads hardly ever crosses 1% of India's GDP. The pattern, sadly, is same across the countries.

Further, almost all these countries are marred by the menace of nearly defunct public institutions meant to deliver programmes eradicating hunger and malnutrition. The rot in the social welfare institutions of these countries means that almost nothing reaches the poor, lost to vested interests entrenched deep in the system.

It is clear that the only way to eradicate hunger from the region is ensuring adequate funding for the social sector, together with functioning public institutions delivering the benefits to the needy. All forms of pilferage, leaks, and outright loot, due to endemic corruption, has to be weeded out.

In light of this, the ALRC urges the Council to:

a) Ask the governments in Asia to begin nationwide programmes in order to bring all their children under nutritional coverage. The Council must also urge the governments to ensure that the programmes launched to alleviate hunger and malnutrition have universal coverage and are not only for 'targeted' populations.

b) Ask the governments to pay particular attention to the children of marginalized and dispossessed communities, and those hailing from lower castes, classes, and indigenous communities. The council must also ask the governments to investigate discrimination along caste, communal, ethnic, gender and other lines that institutionalize and perpetuate malnutrition, which then reinforces the vicious cycle of wasting-stunting leading to poverty, and poverty leading to even more wasting and stunting among the children of such communities.

c) Ask the governments to invest in public institutions, make them accessible and responsive for the people. The Council must also ask the governments to put a grievance redress mechanism in place for the people to access in case of the institutions malfunctioning.